




IN SUMMARY:

Coral Reef Conservation Partnerships

 N FEBRUARY 28, 2005, NOAA Ocean Service (NOS) Assistant Administrator Dr. Richard Spinrad and NOAA Fisheries Service (NMFS) Assistant Administrator Dr. William Hogarth hosted a dialog with more than 20 coral reef managers, scientists, fishery management council representatives, non-governmental organization representatives, and other coral reef specialists from across the country. The forum, held in conjunction with the 13th biannual U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting, provided an important opportunity for NOAA's partners to discuss cooperative coral reef conservation efforts underway at the national, regional and local levels with Dr. Spinrad, Dr. Hogarth, Tim Keeney, NOAA Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere, and David Kennedy, NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (Coral Program) Manager.

OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Spinrad began the meeting by discussing the increased national attention to ocean issues resulting from the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy Report (USCOP), and said that NOAA was at a turning point in its effort to be a Global Leader in Integrated Management of the Ocean. He highlighted the significant USCOP focus on coral reef conservation, and summarized the Administration's response to the USCOP Report. He mentioned the President's FY2006 budget, as submitted to Congress, which calls for \$2.7 million for Coral Reef Local Action Strategies, \$1.5 million of which would be administered by NOAA.

Dr. Spinrad also described NOAA's Coral Program, which was founded in 2000 to combine expertise from NOAA's Line Offices for a multidisciplinary approach to managing and understanding coral reef ecosystems. He noted that the Coral Program facilitates and supports significant partnerships with scientific, private, government and nongovernmental groups at local, state, federal and international levels. Some of NOAA's key partnership initiatives include serving as the co-chair of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (CRTF), assistance with development and implementation of Local Action Strategies in each coral reef jurisdiction, cooperative research and management, the support of two grant programs, and funding for a wide variety of other coral reef-related conservation efforts in U.S. state/territory areas and internationally.

Dr. Hogarth discussed NMFS involvement in the Coral Program, including the work of NMFS regional offices and science centers, and recent accomplishments of the Fishery Management Councils. He also highlighted the cooperative and ongoing marine debris removal effort in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as an exemplary partnership that is achieving measurable conservation outcomes.

Mr. Keeney welcomed all participants, and noted NOAA's interest in hearing about the issues they face each day with their own programs. He asked constituents to share their ideas for improving NOAA's efforts, including any additional actions NOAA should undertake to implement cooperative conservation initiatives more effectively.



DIALOG SESSION

Dr. Spinrad opened the discussion by recognizing that many of the roundtable participants are taking the lead in implementing conservation measures on the ground. He asked participants to discuss the collaborative partnerships already in place between NOAA and its constituents working to advance coral reef conservation, as well as new opportunities for cooperative action. Dr. Spinrad also asked participants to address the effectiveness of these partnerships, and what NOAA should continue to do to support them. In addition, he noted that it is important for NOAA to hear how to improve its services and products to assist in their work.

Participants described their coral programs and the history of their coordination with NOAA. Following are the major themes that emerged regarding how NOAA can maintain and improve collaborative work with its constituents.

Incorporating Local Knowledge for Effective Collaboration

Many participants expressed that NOAA has taken the lead among federal agencies in actively working to involve and engage the full range of coral constituents in decision-making, management planning and program execution. Further, a number of participants praised NOAA for recognizing and incorporating local knowledge and expertise in coral reef management initiatives. Several participants noted that the coral reef states and territories must often focus on immediate and pressing needs, and that collaboration with NOAA is helpful for developing long-term vision and capacity for local programs. The state and territory resource management agencies stressed the importance of these partnerships and of building trust between agencies and staff over the long term.

Many of those present asked NOAA to work with other federal agencies to emphasize the importance of collaboration with local and regional entities. In some cases, participants observed a disconnect in other CRTF agencies between the priorities of federal leadership and the program execution of regional field staff. Participants suggested that the cause for this disconnect might be that regionally based federal staff may not be familiar with coral reef ecosystem science. Therefore, NOAA was asked to share its experiences with and strategies for collaboration to help other federal agencies ensure that their activities complement local and regional management aims. A priority need for increased federal cooperation at local and regional levels is in Local Action Strategy (LAS) implementation.

Even as participants recognized NOAA's Coral Program as a federal leader in integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches to management, they offered a number of suggestions for improving the long-term and day-to-day effectiveness and efficiency of these collaborations. These issues are outlined as follows.

NOAA Coral Grant Programs and Capacity-building

Participants from across sectors reported that NOAA grant funding and other financial assistance have been key ingredients for the development and success of management and conservation efforts on the ground. The importance of continued and increased funding for program development and project implementation at state, territory and local levels was repeatedly stressed. Participants praised the new Coral Reef Management Fellowship program, which places young professionals in state and territory agencies for a period of two years, as an exemplary program that helps build staff and agency capacity. All who mentioned the Fellows requested that the program be extended indefinitely.

Almost all constituents receiving funds from NOAA expressed an interest in better coordination of NOAA's multiple grant opportunities. As relevant grant programs are run by a variety of NOAA program offices, grantees must deal with many different application processes, reporting requirements, and timelines. Several agencies reported that they have hired a full-time grants administrator solely to handle NOAA's multiple application and reporting processes. Participants expressed frustration with an administrative burden at this level, which they feel takes time and funding away from their first priority: implementing grant-funded projects.

Local Action Strategies

Participants across sectors praised NOAA's role in helping develop Local Action Strategies (LAS) and in funding LAS projects. The LAS initiative is a multi-sector effort involving thousands of stakeholders in translating the National Coral Reef Action Strategy into measurable local initiatives. State and territory resource management agencies stressed the importance of increased funding for LAS projects over the next 3 years, as the priorities laid out in each LAS are currently beyond the fiscal means of most local agencies. These agencies also emphasized that the LAS projects, while important, are just the first step in developing broader coral conservation programs. They requested NOAA's continued support in using LAS projects to build their long-term capacity to successfully manage coral reefs, and highlighted the particular need for increased staff.

Partnerships with the Non-governmental Community

One scientist expressed a need for more opportunities for interaction between scientists in academia and at NOAA. The Coral Reef Institutes in Florida, Puerto Rico and Hawaii were highlighted as models of scientific collaboration across sectors, as well as an important tool for strengthening these collaborations. It was suggested that NOAA develop a clearer mechanism for posing key scientific questions to the wider community, then offering funds, post-doctoral fellowships, or opportunities for collaborative research to address these questions. Another constituent noted that NOAA could take better advantage of its ability to bring together resource managers and academic researchers through regional meetings and workshops.

Several constituents noted that NOAA plays a key coordination role in bringing together NGOs and other sectors. The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Education and Outreach Working Group, an active, multi-sector body chaired by the NOAA Coral Program, was praised as an important model of collaboration between the NGO, academic and agency communities. This group has collaboratively designed workshops for CRTF meetings on a range of research, management and public education topics, and several participants expressed an interest in continuing and expanding this collaboration. The need for significantly increased funding for outreach and education was expressed by a number of constituents. In addition to increased funding and training support that could be provided by NOAA, one constituent suggested the possibility of looking to the private sector to help fund public education initiatives.

Several Fishery Management Council participants noted that they are developing outreach programs, and are working with state agencies and NGOs to develop effective management plans. They noted that disagreements sometimes arise in areas where Councils overlap with marine protected areas managed by other agencies, and stressed the importance of developing common conservation goals when potentially competing drivers and mandates are in place.

Evaluating Performance and Effectiveness

Many participants discussed the importance of formal evaluation of Coral Program performance, and of the way in which NOAA measures the performance of grant-funded projects. The state and territory agencies, which receive ongoing funding, requested that NOAA focus less on assessing the effectiveness of a particular short-term project and more on the success of long-term capacity building and program development. Mr. Keeney indicated that NOAA also struggles with performance measurements to show conservation successes, and asked for feedback on how to better demonstrate our collective progress.

Ecosystem-based Management

Several participants praised the Coral Reef Research Plan for fiscal years 2005-2010 (currently under development and public review) as an important step in integrating regional and national research priorities for NOAA and the wider community. However, many expressed the importance of working across sectors to collectively examine how to make ecosystem-based management a reality. The difficulty of managing across an ecosystem was discussed, and Dr. Spinrad stressed the importance of building connectivity between coastal management and coral reef management programs.

Committee on Ocean Policy

Several participants suggested that the Cabinet-level Committee on Ocean Policy should better incorporate regional expertise through regional constituent meetings. Dr. Spinrad indicated that the expanded Ocean Research Advisory Panel would be the most important place to express that viewpoint. Mr. Keeney mentioned the upcoming conference on the Executive Order on Facilitation of Cooperative Conservation for 1,200 environmental leaders.

New Opportunities

Several partners highlighted the need for global partnerships and collaboration, particularly in the Freely Associated States. They emphasized the importance of programs that work across organizations and boundaries to collectively define and implement best management practices to stem global coral reef decline.

A representative from the World Bank noted that international partnerships have existed between the Bank and NOAA for years, and cited that the Bank has often served as an agent for extending NOAA science into the world of international management and policy. The representative noted the opportunity for partnering in three new areas: technology transfer, coral disease, and closer collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Service on sustainable fisheries initiatives.

Several NGO participants who work in cold-water coral ecosystems expressed that they were pleased to observe the variety of collaborative activities for shallow reef-building corals. They indicated a desire to build this same level of cooperative action among the organizations and sectors dedicated to protecting cold-water coral communities.

A number of constituents expressed a desire to see NOAA take a leadership role with the news media.

Although many constituents have access to Mr. Keeney twice per year at the biannual public CRTF meetings, participants expressed that this sort of roundtable is a rare and welcome opportunity. Most expressed a desire to have more such roundtables with NOAA. Participants also suggested holding “town hall” meetings that can include more constituents and the leadership of other federal agencies.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing, Mr. Keeney joined Drs. Spinrad and Hogarth in responding to several of the key themes expressed by participants. Mr. Keeney thanked all who participated in the roundtable for their willingness to share their thoughts and opinions. He reported that the Coral Reef Conservation Act, which mandates NOAA's work and authorizes NOAA's funding, is up for reauthorization in 2005. The Administration will submit a legislative proposal, and he offered that the roundtable participants' feedback would be considered in drafting the bill.